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ABSTRACT

This paper, in discussing the implementation of middle schools, makes six recommendations: (1) the program should reflect the needs of individual students: (2) the curriculum and schedules should accommodate an appropriate amount of independent study time paralleling the maturity of the individual: (3) the program should incorporate a non-graded schedule that, on a daily basis, would permit social and academic integration: (4) the curriculum should focus on teaching individuals how to learn: (5) the school climate should focus on the individual socially, psychologically, and academically: and (6) the special teacher training and certification needs necessary to cope with the emerging adolescent should be recognized. (Author/LD)

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THE SCHOOL IN THE MIDDLE -- WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT IT?

Bruce Howell

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THE SCHOOL IN THE MIDDLE -- WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT IT?

What's special about the Middle School? In many cases nothing. There has been a name change, maybe a change in grade combinations from 7-8-9 to 6-7-8 or something else, maybe some philosophical writing, but only modestly inacted. It simply hasn't been around long enough to identify as an entity with definite parameters....despite what contemporary proponents say (and I'm one). The profile of the Middle School will be determined over a long period of time. Just like other elements of our educatiin system, it will evolve. Consequently, talking about "special or what's so special", in any actual sense is far premature. After all, the self-contained elementary school implemented by Horace Mann continues its metamorphosis...from self-contained to semi-departmental to open organization. In that instance we would need to ask what's so special about which elementary design?....it's even more of a quandry regarding Middle Schools because at this point in time a mid-school is really whatever individual districts conceive it to be or is related to various motives for its creation. Perhaps that uniqueness is what is "special" about it, at least right now.

You see, the junior high was still being conceptualized by some, many years after its inception in 1909. Emma Thomas Tindel wrote in 1924 that the junior high would "provide the greatest advance for adolescents". Davis wrote in the same year that it should have a general curriculum. In 1929, Cox perceived that the curriculum should "prepare for life". Even in 1955 Harl Douglas was appealing for "individuallzation that is real" for the junior high school. There is no reason to assume that a Middle School image is going to jell more quickly.

My recollection of the first Middle School (not that the name is new) in contemporary literature was Billy Reaves' school in Maryland in the mid-50's. So to draw a parallel in historical development with the junior high school, the Middle School is and will be evolving for some time. Consequently, its "special" features are whatever the local educators want to make of it. Harl Douglas once spoke proudly about the "Middle-School-like-features" of a junior high that he administered in 1919. Yet he was still pleading for modification and relevance in 1955. Maybe, just maybe, 50 years after its inception, we will be able to identify some "special" standard national features of the classic American Middle School.

You see, it's a matter of modification and refinement for most of us today. We're not responding these days to an onslaught of new students like we were in the '60's, we're retrenching....we're not building new facilities, we're conslidating what we have. So the idea of a unique school with an experimental curriculum, ala the wave of the '60's, is pretty much out the window. In fact, in ten short years the Middle School movement has been caught between two opposing trends, expansion vs consolidation and liberalism vs conservativism.

You may recall that the junior high school was organized philosophically to entice grammar school graduates to continue their education....and over the years it did just that. The American people became convinced that first a high school education, and later even a college education was the best ticket to a successful adult life.

Grades 7-8-9 were chosen because those grades followed the 1-6 grammar school. Pure logic for enticement. The illogical aspect of this arrangement, as proponents of the Middle School see it today, is that the curriculum for today's "school in-between" (call it what you want) is that the curriculum in the classic junior high school is more of an extension downward of the senior high school curriculum and not a continuance, a melding, a blending from elementary upward that addresses many of the unique characteristics and needs of the tweenager.

That's why I say that in many cases there is nothing special about schools in-between who have changed the name to "Middle" but retained all of the vestiges and philosophical intent of the junior high school.

Let me also hasten to add that there is nothing special about a name, period. I'm not maligning junior high schools collectively because I am acquainted with some junior high school programs that do reflect some of the continuance, melding, and blending I referred to a moment ago.

I've mentioned the philosophical rationale for implementing junior high schools as enticement at the turn of the century....very simple, very basic, easy to understand and sell to educators and patrons alike. More education, better jobs for graduates, even more jobs for teachers. I've read that in 1900 about 6% of the population finished high school; recent data estimates about 80%....per capita income of graduates with advanced schooling is higher and certainly more teaching positions were needed. These are very special reasons for obtaining support from everyone.

Comes the Middle School! No new jobs for educators, rather it is a matter of realignment of philosophy, a professionally internal thing....complicated and confusing. Reorganization of grades, redividing the turf, realigning the teaching tasks, and so on. Nothing especially saleable in terms of new jobs for educators, nor additional education for kids. Just more work in a time that teachers and administrators are innundated with responsibilities and hobbled by the standardizing efforts of unions.

BASIC RATIONALE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

As I look at the Middle School movement today and over the past decade, I see three basic reasons for implementing such a school in a district. In the late '60's a trend began to reorganize grades in schools to accomplish the integration mandate. Thus, K-6/7-9/10-12 school systems were reorganized to K-4/5-8/9-12 or some similar combination that would mix blacks and whites. Usually, the organization in the middle was named "Middle School". In most instances that was all the change made....just realignment of grades....nothing really special about that.

More recently, the Middle School has been used as a relignment device for declining enrollment....shoring up whatever end of the school population that needs it. Nothing special about that. In fact, in both instances I'd say it's the logic for organization survival. But certainly neither reason can be compared to the easily explained rationale for initiating the junior high school 70 years ago.

I mentioned three basic reasons and here is the third one that does compare philosophically....program reorganization. This reason can make a Middle School special. Some district educators and patrons have redesigned some programs because they were dissatisfied with the continuity and the resulting impact on "middle age kids" in their district. That's special and until those lighthouse programs become emulated and combined under the umbrella of a complete school, the uniqueness espoused by mid-school proponents will remain diluted and the "models" scattered.

You can now begin to imagine how difficult it is to evaluate the Middle School movement. I've given you three reasons why such schools have been organized. A fourth, I call the "band wagon syndrome", even further complicates identity and evaluation. That's when the local district educators and laymen note that someone nearby has a "Middle School" so they change the name over the door and "shazam" they have a "Middle School" also.

I've noted four fairly common reasons for implementing the contemporary Middle School, there are probably at least that many more motives for its implementation across the nation.

FLEXIBILITY AND CREATIVITY

What's special about a Middle School?....well, it appears that at least the name stirs creative juices. Now let's not leave that alone. Let's consider the merits of this flexibility, this nebulous word "middle". Let's consider how few opportunities there are in today's education framework to be creative, to innovate. In 1969 I wrote an article entitled "There is No Middle School Yet" and concluded by saying "Hopefully there never would be". I was criticizing standardization and pointing out at that time that the most special feature of the Middle School may be its flexibility, the opportunity for locals to innovate and administer to the needs of kids in their district to not be bound by a set of curriculum and organization rules.

You see what a nightmare evaluating the Middle School movement can be, trying to identify special features? The whole movement is still so new that a Middle School can be just about whatever anyone wants to call it and at this point that's not all bad. In this day of bureaucracy, limited funds, and circumspectness, it's kind of refreshing to be able to innovate and be creative at least in one facet of the schooling process. Maybe that is the outstanding contemporary feature of the Middle School, it is in fact, what I, the local educator/innovator, deem it to be.

In relation to an historic chronology, the Middle School has been conceived and is now in the egg stage. Hatched, it may become an ostrich, swan, or turtle. Perhaps it will take on the image of whoever takes the necessary time to incubate and nurture it. Having now developed a total disclaimer for standardization and having attempted to pick apart the idea that Middle Schools are mature enough to be "special", let me reverse the field and note what I see emerging ever so sporadically as possible "special" features of the Middle School.

THE EMERGING MIDDLE SCHOOL I SEE

Emphasizing that the features of the contemporary American Middle School are still basically philosophic, let me conceptualize with you about what I hear, see, and read that Middle School educators are striving for....what can make the Middle School "special" in its adulthood.

First, the Middle School schedule and curriculum most be designed in such a way that it will produce diagnosis of elementary school graduates needs....and support a responsive curriculum. That is to say that the ultimate program for individual emerging adolescents will not be standardized, but will reflect the needs of that individual. This can be accomplished by introducing a variety of teaching strategies into the curriculum, associating the appropriate strategy with the appropriate subject matter and assigning staff according to the needs of that strategy and subject matter in a differentiated pattern. It is imperative that to achieve this special aspect we relate our philosophy to defined objectives, those objectives to identified strategies and learning models, and those models to appropriate subject matter and staff alignment. The strategies built into the schedule must reflect life-long needs and the program for this age level should in effect be a laboratory for life.

Second, the curriculum and schedule must accommodate an appropriate amount of independent study time paralleling the maturity of the individual. Someone once said, if independent study is going to be our primary means for learning for fifty or more years after leaving school, we would do well to learn the process in school. The formative years of early adolescence is the ideal time to promote this learning skill.

Third, the Middle School program must incorporate a non-graded schedule that, on a daily basis, permits social and academic integration. If the first premise of diagnosis and prescription is to be realized, lock-stepped placement of kids by age-grading must be replaced by appropriate placement and constant regrouping in order to fulfill the philosophic commitment of the Middle School.

Fourth, the curriculum must focus primarily on teaching individuals how to learn. That is, heavy on the basic processes of reading, independent study skills, anything that equips a kid to attack and resolve a problem. It is just imperative that we place independent learning as the number one process objective for these youngsters. The very essence of the Middle School curriculum, its speciality, must be based on capitalizing on the curiosity, the quest for individuality, and the zest for independence that characterizes the emerging adolescent.

Fifth, the school climate must focus on the individual socially and psychologically as well as academically. It is vital that the learning experiences of middle age kids are orchestrated with their competencies. Therefore, it is important that teachers be involved in social counseling both as role models and as academic mentors in order to better understand these individual competencies. The application of the teacher-advisory system at an early stage of program development is essential to the fulfillment of this objective.

Sixth and finally, it is my opinion that the Middle School can only become "special" when more colleges of education recognize the special teacher training and certification needs necessary to cope with the emerging adolescent. Very few have as yet. Perhaps this is too much to expect in view of the fact that most state departments and colleges to date have not recognized the preparation needs of junior high school educators.

SUMMARY

I believe the best way to respond to the question, "What's special about the Middle School?' is to counter with a series of questions that paraphrase a presentation by Clayton Buehl of Philadelphia back in 1965. While examining program changes for schools in the mid-years, Buehl asked:

Does it provide a properly trained staff?
Does it provide flexibility for emotional differences?
Does it provide flexibility for academic differences?
Does it provide opportunities for pursuit of individual differences?
Does it encompass the desired age group?
Does it promote academic relationships?
If it is agreed that this age group exhibits significantly different characteristics than high school students, can we say that the programs for both levels are significantly different?

If and when affirmative answers can be given to these questions, I would say that would make the Middle School "special". Until that time and realistically I must say that the uniqueness of the Middle School today bears the burden of potential that is only just emerging. This potential is now only sporadically visible on a national basis. Many fine programs are emerging, but like proud parents of a growing infant, it is imperative that educators neither push too fast, nor act too conservatively in its development. We've learned a lot about experimentation and program modification and how to implement change in the last twenty years. The Middle School can become "special" as a result. Our educator minds conceptualize a lot in the abstract that takes much time to develop in the concrete.

I am reminded of a sign I say a few years ago in a college cafeteria, "Why is there never time to do it right but there is always time to do it over?" Let's take a lesson from the past and do it right then we can realistically promote that "special" Middle School.

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